Lifelong Learning and the New Economy: Sorting through the Rhetoric

Jane Cruikshank
University of Regina

How has the workplace changed in the New Economy? What problems are workers experiencing? Do federal government policies that focus on skill development to enhance Canadian competitiveness in the global economy work? During the 2003-2004 academic year, using a grounded theory research method (Creswell, 1998) and working from a critical perspective, I asked these questions to 11 Saskatchewan-based union organizers and staff representatives. In the Fall of 2004, I interviewed seven university-based adult educators from across Canada and asked for their analysis of the issues raised by the union research participants, and feedback on my analysis of the data.

Workplace Issues

I asked the union participants to discuss changes in the workplace with the so-called New Economy and to discuss three “work” issues of importance to them. The three issues that emerged most often were workload, job insecurity and loss of job satisfaction.

Workload

Stan argued that, with technology and the downsizing of the 1990s, the size of people’s workloads “has increased quite dramatically.” Martha spoke of how the pace of work has “just speeded up incredibly.” Amy added:

We all use e-mail now. We all have voice mail now…And those create other changes such as an expectation from people who are sending you an e-mail that because it’s instantaneous communication there will be an instantaneous response. It’s the same with voice mail and I’m frequently quite torn about the intrusion of that technology. Cell phones are another example. So unless you are really disciplined about it, which I’m not, you’re never really unplugged.

Andrew spoke of the intrusion of technology on workers and noted that, particularly in white collar work, “it’s become very, very busy.” He said:

I read an article that said that the average office worker or white collar worker is interrupted something like 70 times a day—with phone calls or e-mails or voice mail or beepers or cell phones. And that’s the average. The person who did this was doing an analysis of how much time we’re actually getting to do our jobs, to do our work, because we’re responding to all these immediate demands on our time.

The downsizing of the 1990s has taken a heavy toll on workers. Brian said that, because of the job cuts, there is “a crunch on the workers that are left.” Brian believed that the New Economy is placing tremendous pressure for the “so-called productivity” of workers. “It’s driving people crazy” he exclaimed. He added, “There’s a lot of pressure on people to perform up to a standard that’s unachievable.” Hope said, “People are just beleaguered. Workplaces have become just inhumane. And yes, it’s all consuming.”

While workload was considered, by many of the research participants, to be the main problem workers are experiencing in the workplace, the secondary issue caused by
the workload was stress. Lucy explained, “We have huge problems with absenteeism, use of sick leave, Employee Family Assistance Programs and workplace injuries.” Stan spoke of the high numbers of workers using long-term disability plans. He noted that the fastest growing claims are stress claims, because people are “just burning out.” Stan believed that stress claims are high for two reasons: overwork and lack of mobility. In the past, when people were unhappy in their jobs they could move to another job in the same organization or find a job in a different workplace. However, because of the current job situation, there aren’t many jobs for people to move to. He said: “So people have very limited ability to leave. Perhaps that’s not a resolution to the problem, but it was a coping strategy that worked well. So they simply can’t leave the organization or they can’t move within the organization.”

A study by Brisbois (2003), which explored the quality of work in 17 OECD countries noted that, while 11.3% of workers in OECD countries reported working at high speed all the time, 16.8% of Canadian workers reported this problem, the highest of all the countries surveyed. As well, 31.7% of Canadian workers felt that their health and safety was at risk because of their work, which was above the 28.5% OECD average.

Duxbury and Higgins (2003) reported that job stress has increased dramatically over the last decade. In 1991, approximately one in ten workers reported high job stress, however, by 2001, the number had increased by 22%, to one in three workers. They argued that the increase in job stress “is largely due to the requirements to do more with less (due to downsizing and restructuring), office technology and job insecurity” (p. 27).

Duxbury and Higgins (2001) reported that the number of Canadian workers reporting high role overload increased from 47% in 1991 to 59% in 2001. The number of workers who reported taking work home to complete outside their working hours increased from 31% in 1991 to 52% in 2001. Six out of 10 employees did not receive overtime pay for this work and, as a result, were “donating” time to their employer. Duxbury and Higgins (2003) argued that the downsizing of the 1980s and 1990s and the increase in employee workloads has backfired. They said that the costs saved by reduced payrolls after the downsizing “may be offset by substantial increases in dollars lost due to higher absenteeism for the ‘survivors’” (p. 38).

Andrew spoke of the heavy workload of Saskatchewan workers and said that job stress is taking a toll on their health. He said:

I know that there were somewhere in the neighbourhood of 4 ½ million doctors visits in this province last year. There’s a million people. So that’s 4 ½ times per year. And there were 1 million visits to specialists. So each person in this province is going to a doctor 4 ½ times a year and once to a specialist in a year. And I’m sure that there are many that don’t go at all and some that go many more times. But that’s a symptom of a problem.

Higgins, Duxbury and Johnson (2004) looked at the strain high workloads place on the Canadian health care system. They noted that, in 2001, high workloads cost the health care system $5.92 billion, and estimated that, since this time, costs have risen even higher. They concluded:

While employers may be saving money by ‘doing more with less,’ downsizing and rightsizing, Canadian taxpayers are paying a premium for this strategy as it is their tax dollars that are funding the health care system. (p. 36)
Job Insecurity

The years of downsizing have had an impact that continues to resonate throughout the workplace. Brenda noted that, because workers have watched their colleagues lose their jobs, many feel insecure and threatened. Brenda said that workers are afraid to stand up for themselves for fear they will lose their job “or be next in line when job cuts get handed out.” She said, that “even though they know it is a unionized workplace and they know they have protections under the collective agreement, there is a lot of fear.” This has implications for workload issues. Brenda said:

What has happened is that people are being expected to take on the duties of their departed colleagues without an increase in pay. The old “do more with less.”

And because people are quite afraid to be the next to be cut, they do it without squawking.

Given the types of new jobs that are being created, workers have a reason to be afraid. As Hope said, “when they talk about all these jobs that are available—we’ve seen the statistics. It’s all in the service sector. It’s all the low end, low skilled, part-time jobs.”

A study by Saunders (2003) noted that only 63% of Canadian workers hold full-time permanent jobs, leaving 37% of workers in self-employment or in part-time or temporary “contingent” jobs. The number of part-time jobs has risen considerably over the last decade. In 1989, 11% of newly hired employees in the private sector held temporary jobs, however, by 2004, this number had increased to 21% (Statistics Canada, 2005b). In the first three months of 2005, Canadian employers “slashed 10,000 full-time jobs and added 36,000 part-time positions” (Grant, 2005, p. B5). In 2004, 36.5% of Canadians aged 25-44 who were working part-time were doing so because they were unable to find full-time employment. For women in this age bracket, the figure was 32.6%, while for men it was a shocking 51.3% (Statistics Canada, 2005a).

Brian believed that private sector workers are much more insecure than public sector workers. He spoke of the ease in which manufacturing companies can “just pick up and leave.” “It’s not an idle threat” he said, “so that creates insecurity for the workers, big insecurity.” Research conducted by Tsoukalas and Mackenzie (2003) found that in 2002, 23% of Canadians were afraid they might lose their jobs over the next two years.

Loss of Job Satisfaction

Participants spoke of the downgrading of jobs that has taken place since the early 1990s, and the effect of this on workers. Brenda said:

Despite the fact that that work has gone to shit, people still feel a need to believe what they spend their working hours doing has some purpose…We want to believe that we are doing something useful and yet the message from the employer is that you are not valuable and are very contingent.

Brenda said that, because of the lay-offs during the last decade, “there’s been a boxing in of people’s expectations.” Work, she said, has become “nastier and more brutish.”

Kate believed the introduction of technology into the workplace has resulted in a deskilling of jobs, a loss of autonomy for workers, and an increased surveillance of workers. She said that many people have jobs that, in the past, covered a variety of activities. However, computers have been used to “atomize those skills” so that now people are “doing a very narrow range of activities,” a process that makes it easy for employers to contract out parcels of work. Kate said, the workplace has become “much
more hierarchical and much more punitive, much more rigid and rule-oriented.” Workers have become very unhappy. She added, “People have a tendency to revolt when they’re being humiliated and their intellectual abilities are being downgraded.”

Andrew was outraged at the deteriorating treatment of workers. He believed that, with globalization and the rush to be competitive, workers have been exploited. While Saskatchewan has some of the best labour legislation in Canada, “they’re not enforcing it.” He asked, “When was the last time an employer got prosecuted for ripping off a clerk or cheating a server out of their money that they’re entitled to?” He said, “Restaurants are making their servers pay into an insurance fund of a buck a shift.” He continued:

And it’s called ‘dine and dash’ insurance so that if one of the servers is serving a table of people and the people get up and walk out without paying, that it gets paid for out of this ‘dine and dash’ insurance.” It’s people making $6.00 an hour that are paying to insure the business against theft. They’re doing it everywhere. All the big chains… That’s clearly against the law. The government knows about it and they won’t do anything about it.

When workers are treated in such a manner, it is not surprising that low worker commitment becomes an issue. Duxbury and Higgins (2003) stated that only 53% of workers are committed to the organization in which they work. They noted that organizational commitment declined precipitously – by 13 points between 1991 and 2001, a decline which “is not surprising given the amount of downsizing and restructuring that occurred throughout the 1990s” (p. 24). As well, 46% of Canadian workers are “so disenchanted with their workplaces, they would “consider jumping ship if a comparable job were available” (Galt, 2005. p. B1).

Lifelong Learning and the Skills Challenge

Historically, lifelong learning (under the name adult education) in Canada had a broad base and covered a wide variety of purposes and activities. The Antigonish Movement, Farm Radio Forum, and the Fogo Island Process are examples of this (Selman et al., 1998; Welton, 1987). These programs included community development and social justice visions and worked to strengthen local communities. Emphasis was placed on community economic development that would help communities become self-sustaining.

However, with the advent of the so-called New Economy, all this has changed. We are being told we must develop skills so that Canada can be competitive in the global economy. Canadian government lifelong learning policies have become increasingly tied to skill development (Council of Ministers, 1999; OECD, 2001; Statistics Canada, 1999). Federal papers are filled with statements stressing the importance of addressing the “skills challenge.” For example, an Industry Canada (2001) document claims that Canada’s goal is to “develop the most skilled and talented labour force in the world” (p. 60) and “to become one of the most innovative countries in the world, Canada must manage knowledge as a strategic national asset” (p. 34).

Human capital theory argues that, by investing in themselves through education and training, individuals can “increase their lifetime earnings” and governments can use these investments “as a way of enhancing economic growth” (Brown, Green and Lauder, 2001, p. 5). However, skill formation policies are “limited to ‘supply side’ policies that place schools, colleges, universities, and training organizations at the frontline in the
battle for economic competitiveness” (p. 11), but fail to deal with economic capacity because they believe that industrial policies are “the purview of business” (p. 12), and that an unfettered market will lead to the creation of good jobs. The federal government outlined its commitment to human capital policies in its 2002 policy report titled Knowledge Matters: Skills and Learning for Canadians. The report states:

To remain competitive and keep up with the accelerating pace of technological change, Canada must continuously renew and upgrade the skills of its workforce. We can no longer assume that the skills acquired in youth will carry workers through their active lives. Rather, the working life of most adults must be a period of continuous learning. (HRDC, 2002, p. 37)

The report describes a framework for implementing the skills agenda. The three main aspects of the framework are: strengthening accessibility to post-secondary education; building a world class workforce; and recognizing the credentials of immigrants and ensuring that, by 2010, 65% of adult immigrants have post-secondary education (HRDC, 2002). This focus toward “high skills” has been critiqued by a number of writers (Livingstone, 1999; Stanford, 2001).

Because of the increased importance of skills development, on December 12, 2003, Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) was divided into two new departments: Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRDSC) and Social Development Canada. The reorganization was designed to build “a 21st century economy” and to ensure “Canada’s role in the world” (Treasury Board, 2004, p. 1). The mandate of HRSDC is to enhance Canada’s competitiveness by “supporting investment in and recognition and utilization of skills” (p. 2).

In a March 2004 speech, the then-Minister of Human Resources and Skills Development, Joe Volpe, spoke glowingly of the need for a highly skilled workforce:

Skilled workers are the source of innovation—the key to sustaining economic growth in the new economy. Canadian workers’ capacity to capitalize on changing skills needs (sic) will underpin the productivity and competitiveness of Canadian firms in the decades ahead. (Volpe, 2004).

Critiquing the Skills Challenge

I asked the participants about their perceptions of the current “high skills” focus of Canada’s lifelong learning policies. A number of themes emerged.

Defining the Problem

Many participants argued that both governments and business are misdiagnosing the problem. Kate explained:

There’s this focus on skills. “If you guys only had the right skills, there’d be no unemployment.” What they’re doing is obfuscating what the real issues are. Capitalism requires high unemployment. If someone does some layoffs and gets rid of people, the stock goes up. That’s what’s happening. This is good for capital. It may not be good for the worker.

Brenda said that businesses are defining the problem “in a completely wrong way” when they claim that the solution is for workers to get more education. She said:
The problem is there are not enough jobs or the kinds of jobs that people have been trained to do are vanishing and what is available are jobs, you know, that are quite frankly – what training do you need to flip burgers?

Wesley, an academic adult educator, was clear that the problem is not a skill deficit, but a lack of good jobs for people with skills. Speaking of the skill deficit discourse, Wesley said, “This is the whole notion of blaming the victim, insisting on a skill deficit that doesn’t exist and misdiagnosing the problem.” Stanford (2001) argued that the skills of millions of Canadians are being wasted because they are employed in jobs that don’t require their skills. He argued that one-quarter of Canadians with post-secondary education “are employed in clerical, sales, and menial service jobs” (p. 31).

Stephen was angry at the way workers have been treated in the so-called New Economy. He spoke of call centres re-locating to Saskatchewan and said “they don’t give a damn about anybody.” He argued that these employers come to Saskatchewan solely because government provides financial incentives and described them as “very poor employers.” Referring to workers, he said, “I just see a lot of discouragement.”

Andrew was equally as scathing in his response to the “skills challenge” rhetoric. He argued that it’s “a response to NAFTA and this whole global trade dominated type of agenda that seems to have taken over the globe.” This agenda, he said, sacrifices both the environment and worker’s rights. Speaking of a specific employer that received tax incentives to locate in Saskatchewan, and describing it as “corporate blackmail,” he said: 10 years of no taxes. That’s the city’s contribution to (___) coming in here and creating 700 crappy jobs. The taxpayers pay for them to come here and set up shop and they’re walking in and all the big companies are walking around saying, “Well what are you going to do for us to come and set up?” … So we’re in this race to the bottom about who can give the most subsidies to corporations and the least red tape and the most incentives… so they can create crappy jobs.

Skills Agenda

Kate spoke of the narrowness of the skills agenda. Kate believed that education should be about “the ability to think” and “to develop oneself” and argued that the skills agenda has “very little to do with that.” Amy believed that if workers are intimidated by the technology in their workplace, “then certainly training to enable people to feel adequate or comfortable with that” is important. However, she argued, training people to adapt to the so-called New Economy “encourages the mechanistic ‘I’m just a meaningless cog in a big wheel’ approach to life.

While the skills agenda places a high priority on training for information and technology jobs, Beckstead et al. (2003) stated that, in 2000, the ICT sector employed only 4.1% of all workers in Canada, and the science sector employed 4%. Consequently, 91.9% of all jobs in Canada are not the high profile science and information/technology jobs but, instead, are just ordinary jobs. Many of the information/technology jobs are now moving overseas. A report by PricewaterhouseCoopers predicted that by 2010, 14% of all current IT jobs will move to low cost countries like India, China and Russia. By 2010, it predicted that 75,000 Canadian IT jobs will move overseas or be repatriated to the United States. The report maintained that in any IT business, only 30% of IT staff must be close to the customers; the remaining 70% of IT staff can be located anywhere in the world. In fact, “any knowledge-based function that does not require direct personal
interaction is a candidate” (Scott & Ticoll, 2004, p. 2) for outsourcing. However, federal government continues to speak of the importance of IT jobs.

Ned, an academic adult educator, believed that when employers use the term lifelong learning, they simply want workers to become more compliant. Ned continued: I’m not saying there aren’t some benefits from the current push on education, training, and lifelong learning, because there are. Sometimes it opens up opportunities for workers to re-skill or to move up a grade and so they can use the rhetoric to advantage sometimes. But it’s amazing how many employers talk about just work as learning, but they’re not prepared to give people time off to reflect on what it is they’re doing there.

Stan raised the contradiction between the current focus of skills training for global competitiveness and low levels of government funding of post-secondary education. If governments were serious about learning, he said, they would not be raising tuition fees at Canada’s colleges and universities. It’s bizarre, Stan said, “that we keep increasing tuition fees because it really acts as a deterrent fee.” Because the majority of post-secondary education is paid by the taxpayer, tuition fees become user fees which just reduce accessibility. “It seems to me just crazy,” said Stan. Since higher education is expected to increase a graduate’s income, then “we can collect that back in the form of income tax” rather than increasing tuition fees. However, government funding for universities fell considerably during the 1980s and 1990s. Between 1986 and 2001, government funding “decreased by 4.5% while revenue from private sources, primarily student fees, rose by 167%” (Hemmingway & McMullen, 2004, p. 5).

**Credentialism and Deskilling**

A number of participants spoke of credentialism and deskilling that has occurred in the workplace. Andrew spoke of the rising education levels of workers and the fact that the educational bar “keeps going up.” He said:

There’s nothing fundamentally wrong with a more educated workforce. But at certain points, what’s bona fide in terms of the requirements for a job. Is it necessary for someone to have a university degree to flip burgers in a fast food outlet? …And we see a whole generation of people coming out of university, highly educated, with no ability to get a job in their chosen field and so we’ve got burger flippers with degrees.

Wesley argued that workers are doing a great deal to upgrade their knowledge and skills. The problem, he said, is:

More and more employers are asking more and more employees to get more and more credentials of knowledge without in any way fundamentally modifying the job structure…And hence we have a growing underemployment problem.

Canada has one of the highest qualified workforces in the world. In 2003, 60.7% of the labour force (age 25-54) had a post-secondary certificate, diploma or degree (Saskatchewan’s, 2004). According to Statistics Canada (2004), 4,483,200 Canadians had a post-secondary certificate or diploma, and 2,905,800 had a university degree. However, Compton (2002) argued that 25% of Canadian workers believe they are overqualified for their jobs. This perception, she said, was held by workers holding diplomas as well as bachelors, masters and doctoral degrees. Lowe (2000) argued that 29% of university graduates are working in jobs that do not require a university degree,
and one in five workers with post-secondary credentials are working in jobs that require a high school diploma. Lowe argued that these facts “are inconsistent with a knowledge-based economy” (p. 16). As well, educational credentials do not guarantee a living wage. In 2003, 14% of employed adults in Canada worked for less than $10.00 an hour. Among this group, 38% had a post-secondary certificate, diploma or degree (Saunders, 2004).

Implications for Lifelong Learning

There is a huge gap between the rhetoric of lifelong learning for the New Economy and the reality of the Canadian workplace. The rhetoric speaks of global competitiveness, workers talk about survival in the workplace. The rhetoric talks about knowledge jobs, workers talk about flipping burgers and call centres. The rhetoric talks about skill training, workers say that lifelong learning is simply a “way to cull the herd.” The rhetoric talks about knowledge work, but studies show that only a very small percent of jobs fit the “knowledge work” category and that many of these jobs are moving to countries where salaries are lower.

Economic globalization has created unhealthy workplaces and disheartened workers. Workers have been downsized, rightsized, and de-hired through such processes as “head count reduction,” “involuntary attrition” and “reductions in force” (Pitts, 2001, p. B1). In short, workers have been treated as disposable commodities in the name of efficiency. Lifelong learning, in this environment, has become a survival strategy and a “chore” that is tacked onto an already overwhelming workload.

Canada does not have a skill shortage; Canada has a lack of decent jobs for people with skills. We have a stressed out workforce filled with unhappy people who are told to “do more with less” in the name of global competitiveness.

In order to develop policies that are supportive of workers, we must work on two fronts: (a) workplace reform, and (b) broaden the focus of lifelong learning. Some people are benefiting from the so-called New Economy, but many are losing. Both Harry and Wesley spoke of the need to conduct and support research that counters the skills development focus of lifelong learning. Wesley added that it is also important to talk about alternatives. He said:

The first alternative is to reverse the optic. The solution to economic problems is not education. The solution to economic problems is economic reform. And if you go down that road, what kind of economic reforms are viable?

It is important to look at workplace issues such as workplace reform, worker empowerment, the redistribution of work, and parallel systems, such as cooperatives and community economic development activities—activities that, historically, have been an integral part of adult education practice.

However, we need a vehicle to translate our research into policy. Three university-based adult educators (Glen, James and Ken) spoke of the demise of the Canadian Association for Adult Education (CAAE), which had a long history of advocacy and lobbying for policy changes. Now the CAAE is gone, there is a vacuum at the policy-making level. Ken said, “We don’t have a national association that’s arguing for an understanding and appreciation” of adult education and learning. As a result, he said, “Those of us who work in the broad traditions of adult education have no means of articulating our concerns and then putting pressure upon the federal and provincial
governments.” James said, “Unless we can organize in a different way, get political strength, not very much will change.”

**Conclusion**
Lifelong learning policies that focus on skill development are one-dimensional. They are geared solely to the supply side of the equation, often at the expense of workers. If lifelong learning is to be more than a ‘competitive advantage’ in a job search, then we must re-think the policies of lifelong learning as they are currently constructed. As well, we must develop a vehicle to lobby for lifelong learning policies that benefit not only business, but also and more importantly, workers.

**References**


